TO STIR A CITY

The Church of the Covenant
Cleveland, Ohio

May 22, 1994

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois

I have loved Cleveland for forty-six years. It was the year I fell in love — for the first time. The object of my awakened passion was baseball. My team, the Pittsburgh Pirates, had finished dead last in the National League the year before. They were struggling as the 1948 Season began at the moment my ardor was awakened. But over in the American League, out in Cleveland, Ohio, there was a ***team,*** and for some reason that is still not altogether clear to me, I claimed if as my own. Robinson, Gardner, Keltner and Boudreau — a playing manager, Doby, Tucker, Mitchell, Jim Hegan and those pitchers! Lemon, Beardon and Bob Feller. You're looking at a man who for two or three years of his life thought he was Rapid Robert Feller! They won the World Series that year and Cleveland became for me a symbol of all that was good and true and righteous and beautiful. The fact that it hasn't happened again for nearly half a century has prepared me for the heavy responsibility which I now have of sustaining my love of baseball in Chicago as a Cubs fan.

And then a few years later I began to love music and my parents bought me a record — Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony" on one side, Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" on the other, by the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra and George Szell. Cleveland again, source of joy and beauty.

I've loved Cleveland for a long time. In the sixties I was very much aware of the strong leadership this church provided. And when I was in Columbus I was very aware of the The Church of the Covenant — a strong and committed and creative and faithful congregation. And so I'm flattered to have been invited to preach here on so important an occasion.

I respect and admire the work and leadership of Jim Dowd . . . although he tells me he's been saying some very generous things about me, which is not always a good thing for a visiting preacher . . . who knows, always, that real preaching is done by the pastor, the week in and week out work of proclamation, challenge and nurture and that great churches pull great sermons out of their own preachers but rarely from an outsider. Nevertheless, I am grateful to Jim for his generosity and for his ministry and to you for the opportunity to be with you.

It is Pentecost Sunday, the day we occasionally describe as the Church's birthday: the day seven weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus, when the disciples, still hiding out in Jerusalem, experience something of the power and presence of God, and it is such a strangely compelling experience that they employ symbols and metaphors which challenge our imagination — rushing winds, tongues of fire and a cacophony of voices and languages. Talk about Re-imagining God! It was, to say the least, an unsettling experience.

I have chosen to augment the traditional text for Pentecost with another unsettling vignette: Jesus and disciples entering the city the week before the Passover, and the shouting crowds, waving palm branches, singing songs of liberation and freedom, and the nervous authorities huddling quickly to devise a damage control strategy. The whole city was in turmoil, the account reads. Another translation is "the whole city was stirred." I love that image: the city stirred by the presence of God.

The Church of the Covenant shares with both of those texts — the city as context, the city as object of God's action — God's love, God's coming in power in a way that stirs things up.

To stir a city. It's what you've been about here for 150 years, and it is what God calls you and all of us who live and work in and love the city to do in the times ahead. I am not neutral about this. I believe it is the most difficult place to be the church. I also think it is the most exciting and the most critical. I also think the city needs us to be the church in many ways, most of them unacknowledged and uncelebrated and often times unappreciated. But it is not easy. Being the church here is full of contrast, challenge, conflict and what the late Reinhold Niebuhr said about what happens when religion confronts culture — irony. In contrast to the powerful clarity of Pentecost, things happen to us every day that are full of irony.

There was something about his voice. It came through the intercom of the Manse next to the church, urgently, painfully. When you work in a city church you hear, before very long, every conceivable story created, rehearsed, told and retold in order to separate you from a few dollars.

This voice penetrated my own defense perimeters. I went to the door and saw a young man in torn and dirty clothing. His face was bruised and puffy, and he was shivering. It was not particularly cold. He did not ask for money or food. All he wanted was a sweater so he could stop shivering. So I did what we all know we should do under those circumstances. I referred him to our Social Service Center around the corner and returned to the game on television. Just as I sat back down I recalled two things: one, it was 5:30 p.m., and the Social Service Center closes at 5:00 p.m. on Saturday; and two, a wedding was about to begin in the chapel. So I hurried over to the church and sure enough, there he was, standing at the side door near the chapel, the one that is locked, pounding, trying to look through the windows. Inside there were people in tuxedos and lovely dresses engaged in a very important and very happy religious ceremony.

The church staff was caught between the two events: the lovely wedding about to begin and the man standing outside the door, with his face all puffy and bruised, shivering, wanting a sweater. The resolution was simple enough. The receptionist and I went down to the Share Shop, found a sweater and a wool sport coat. I took them up to the man and gave them to him. He was overjoyed, put them both on, thanked me profusely and walked up Chestnut Street.

As I watched him make his way through the small cafe tables outside Crickets, a four-star restaurant immediately west of the church, full of fashionable people with shopping bags from Bloomingdales, Marshall Fields, Lord & Taylor, enjoying a late afternoon drink, I felt guilt, exasperation, anger, frustration. The church can't interrupt a wedding every time a homeless person or an addict or a drunk pounds on the door looking for some guilt-ridden, middle class bleeding heart to finance another bottle of Muscatel. Nor can I play savior to every person with a hand out on Michigan Avenue, not to mention the ten or fifty thousand homeless people on the streets, depending on whose numbers you believe, not to mention millions of hungry people in the country and world. So I watched him walk away from the church, where the processional had now begun, with his discarded wool sweater and sport coat, threading his way through the cocktail crowd at Crickets — still shivering by the way — and I found myself wondering.

Being the church in the city is like that because the city is like that. It's one of the reasons suburban people seem to dislike the city so much and treat you like you have some kind of intelligence deficit if you say something so ludicrous as "I love cities," which I do, always have, always will. But it is not easy to love the city. It takes some effort!

Harvey Cox has written the forward to a fine collection of essays that should be must reading for all of us, *Envisioning The New City: A Reader on Urban Ministry.* Cox, who has spent his career in cities, he says, has been mugged in Chicago, burglarized in Boston, nearly asphyxiated in Mexico City, interrogated in Berlin and hopelessly lost in Tokyo, still loves the city. Cox quotes the German playwright, Berthold Brecht, who remarked that while Shelley thought hell was a place rather like London, in his own opinion it was probably much more like Los Angeles. [p. 13]

The city as hell: a challenging metaphor! I think of it often sitting in traffic on the Kennedy Expressway, investing ninety minutes to travel fifteen miles.

Your city is looking good these days. On Michigan Avenue, Chicago is beautiful, robust, lively . . . But throughout the nation urban problems have reached gargantuan proportions. Columnist William Raspberry wrote recently that the problem of homeless poor people is so complex, so multi-layered, so multi-faceted, so hopeless that he has noticed his own capacity to care shutting down. It's called "Compassion Fatigue."

You know the litany: In this richest nation of the world city schools are bad, public housing is awful, gang violence, drugs, social destruction, family disintegration.

Alex Kotlowitz, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, has written about what city life is like for two young boys growing up in one of Chicago's public housing projects, *There Are No Children Here.* Pharoah Rivers, age ten, and his brother, Lafeyette, thirteen, are sitting in a church pew at the funeral of their friend, Bird Leg, fifteen. Bird Leg was shot on the playground by a rival gang member. A vocalist is singing, "Lean On Me."

> "Large tears slid down Pharoah's plump cheeks. He clutched his rolled-up sweatshirt to his chest for security.
>
> "As the service closed and the mourners moved forward to pass the casket, Pharoah, still gripping his balled-up sweatshirt, asked Lafeyette, 'What's up in heaven? Do they have stores?'
>
> "'Shut up,' Lafeyette said. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'
>
> "As the boys waited to file out, they heard a mother, two rows back, scold her son, 'That could have been you if I'd let you go over there.'
>
> "'We're gonna die one way or the other by killing or plain out,' James said to Lafeyette. 'I jus' wanna die plain out.' Lafeyette nodded. 'Me too.'" [p. 48-51]

Time Magazine featured Camden, New Jersey in an article entitled "Who Could Live Here?" Camden, a once thriving industrial center, is a gutted, flattened city of 100,000, half of them under twenty-one, with 200 liquor stores, no theaters, where you can buy a hand grenade for $400 on the street and where infants die at twice the natural average, which means at the Third World rate or worse. In the recent *Atlantic Monthly* there is a devastating article about "The Code of the Streets" which analyzes the most serious of all our problems — the level of interpersonal violence and aggression in inner city, poor neighborhoods.

Jesus came to the city and loved it enough to know its promise, and enough to hope for its future, loved it enough, Luke reports, to weep over it. And so, it seems to me, that is the least we can do: love the city, thrill at the glory of the city, its beauty, its strength, its grace and its hope, and if necessary experience its pain and pathos, weep at its despair and tragedy.

There is in our cities a lethal combination of forces which is creating an urban problem so large we can no longer even see the entire picture: poverty, drugs, violence, despair, gangs, and guns. And beneath it all, what appears for all the world like a massive, unconditional political surrender, the federal government hands urban problems to the state. States are notoriously broke, and so they hand them to the city itself. At all three levels people get elected by promising to cut spending and never raise taxes, by looking to the private sector, which responds with some justification that its primary business is business — commerce — not urban violence, education and health care.

Which leaves the churches. Perhaps it is our purpose here to keep the vision, to keep the conversation going about what could be, to keep insisting that cities are not hell but holy places. We have refused to think in new ways about drugs and gangs and guns. There are not enough police, not enough courtrooms, not enough jails to begin to win the vaunted war on drugs we declared and have already lost. Because of poverty, despair, and drugs, and family disintegration, an enterprising child in Cabrini-Green will look out at the world and make some basic decisions. An eight-year-old "watcher" on a bicycle, keeping a lookout for police, earns $50 a day. A twelve-year-old can earn twice that much making a few deliveries.

We could, of course, do it better. We could be better. We could build a city that cares for its least, that shelters its homeless, that tends to its sick and educates its children. But it will require a new way of thinking. And it will require sacrifice and money, and toughness and vigilance on the part of people and churches like this church who with one hand feed the poor and the other knock on the door of the politician to talk about a better world and in the meantime keep alive the vision of the city as a place of grace and beauty and faith.

You know, Jesus could have elected to stay in Galilee. God could surely have arranged to send the spirit to the disciples in Capernaum. By coming to the city, Jesus showed where religion is to be focused. But there is something about us, it seems, that resists that movement.

Professor Glenn Tinder wrote about it in *The Political Meaning of Christianity* and observed that American Christians want to keep spirituality separate from the more complex areas of our lives:

> "We are so used to thinking of spirituality as withdrawal from the world and human affairs that we never think of it as political. Spirituality is personal and private, we assume, while politics is public. But such a dichotomy drastically diminishes spirituality." Tinder says, "The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world — that we can practice a spirituality that is not political — is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God."

Our Lord came to the city — the spirit came in Jerusalem — not the retreat center, the lovely sea of Galilee, monastery or cloister, but the noisy, wonderful, tragic, glorious heart of the city. Somewhere in each of us, I suppose, is a wish that he hadn't done that; a desire to keep our God safely transcendent, present to us in quiet, pastoral settings, looking at sunsets, reveling in the goodness and beauty of creation; to keep our Lord in the pleasant, rolling hills of Galilee, to keep our own religion confined to the church sanctuary on Sunday morning. And that might be a tenable position to assume, except for the fact that he rode into the city and that the spirit started a conflagration in the city.

In that sense it's bad news, I suppose. But, as is often the case with religion, it is also the good news because it means that God's commitment to us is absolute, that there is no human situation, regardless of how secular, violent, busy, noisy, that God does not come to be with us. And, that what is true about the city is true for each of us: God comes, God's spirit comes to love us, claim us, comfort and cherishes us — to stir us — at the center of our beings, our hearts.

There is on that road down from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem not only despair but great hope. You, this congregation, are a source of this city's hope: you are a visible reminder of ideas that get lost in the city: that life is precious, that beauty is holy, that kindness and compassion and justice are important. You are a source of hope for Cleveland precisely because you are an intentional counter-culture: in a racially and economically divided society — a place where all are welcome and included and affirmed. In a busy and hurried world where people get lost and forgotten, you are a source of hope by paying attention to ordinary human beings, by ministering to basic human need.

Don Benedict, former head of the Community Renewal Society in Chicago, used to say that the job of a city church is simple: it is to keep alive the rumor that there is a God.

God bless you for doing that for a century and a half; for loving your city, for being a place of grace and beauty, for serving its poor and needy; for advocating for justice and hope, for being a place where transformation and newness and salvation are taken seriously. God bless you for the courage to stir the city and God give you strength and courage to keep at it.

It is God's incredible love in Jesus Christ that gives us courage to care about Cleveland, Chicago. It is God's love for the human family that makes us want the city to be better, to hope for a city that cares for all its people, that celebrates the human condition, that nurtures and fosters and stimulates the best of the human enterprise.

It is because I believe that Jesus came to the city in his final, ultimate act of faithful obedience, and that God's own spirit came powerfully and wonderfully to his friends, in that same city, that I dare to be confident and hopeful about its future.

Stir this city and God will be with you.

Love this city and God will provide the resources you need. Be God's faithful people here and God will give you power and strength and courage.

Did you ever listen carefully to what his friends are chanting and shouting as he comes into the city?

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven."

And did you ever notice how those words are strikingly similar to the words the angels sang at his birth, as God's word becomes flesh and begins to live among us?

"Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace."

And so —

All glory to God and peace, here, in this place, in your midst.

All glory to God for coming to us in Jesus the Christ, and peace, here, in this city, this congregation, now and in all the days ahead.

+ + + + + +

Almighty God, in every age you have called men and women to be your people. We thank you for these people, this congregation: for its faithful past, its vigorous present, its bright future. We ask your blessing, your encouragement and strength, for its ministers, staff and members. Keep them in your care. And send your spirit upon them that they may speak your word clearly and live out your love with passion: that in your name and for your sake they may continue to stir this city; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.